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Source: *The English Journal*, Vol. 90, No. 3, The Lure of Young Adult Literature (Jan., 2001), pp. 97-103

Published by: [National Council of Teachers of English](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/821315>

Accessed: 17/04/2011 17:27

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The Sorcerer's Stone: A Touchstone for Readers of all Ages

SUSAN NELSON WOOD AND KIM QUACKENBUSH

One day, while Harry Potter was lunching in the Great Hall, six large owls flew over the table carrying a strangely shaped package. “Harry was just as interested as everyone else to see what was in this large parcel, and was amazed when the owls soared down and dropped it right in front of him, knocking his bacon to the floor” (Rowling 164). If you have read *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, you may remember the wonderful day when Harry received a new broomstick, the celebrated Nimbus Two Thousand, in a wrapped package delivered by owls. And, of course, you also remember how Harry Potter's

life was forever changed on his fateful eleventh birthday when he received a surprising letter, delivered by an actual giant. As a matter of fact, as an astute fan, you may have noticed that Harry has *several* significant experiences opening and reading strange, new things.

On the other hand, it is possible that you, unlike Harry, remain reluctant to open a popular novel (a strange, new thing) that seems to have dropped suddenly upon our collective heads. Some teachers who have yet to experience the Harry Potter craze report they are waiting their turn for books perpetually checked out of school libraries. In case you are not aware, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, book one in a series of seven stories about Harry Potter, was published first in England, June 1997, under the title *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. Promoted as a book for juveniles, it quickly became a best seller among adult readers. Soon to be released as a Warner Brothers movie, the book has also been published in at least thirty-three countries. By the time you read this article, Harry Potter might have become a television cartoon, a new kind of cereal, or even a figurine to hang from the rearview mirror of our cars. According to Richard Bernstein of the *New York Times*, “Harry is destined for greatness.”

Harry Potter is a literary character of great appeal. In *The Sorcerer's Stone*, the first book about the young wizard, Harry is eleven years old, with “a powerful kind of ache inside him, half joy, half terrible sadness” (209). On the verge of adolescence, Harry struggles to figure himself out, to make friends, and to find a place for himself in the world. In the process, he must also overcome evil and learn how to use his magic wand.

We personally loved the story of Harry Potter, having devoured the first book quickly. As teachers, we also appreciated the inspiration and imagination stimulated by the story, and we applauded the power of this magical book. “Clearly,” we said to each other, “*Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* is a children's book that appeals to readers of all ages.” But then we talked further, listened more closely to the debates about the book, and began to wonder.

As we shared our experiences reading this publishing phenomenon, we discovered we had some questions. For example, we called it a “children's book.” Might it also be young adult literature? Who is reading Harry Potter? Why are they reading it? Does the book really appeal to readers of all ages? And what do those readers think? We'd heard that some parents objected to the wizardry in the story,

considering it to be antireligious, and we also wondered if the story might be striking a chord primarily with white children of privilege. Finally, we wondered how teachers might use this book in classrooms.

To understand and answer some of our questions, we drafted a survey, collected readers' responses at random, analyzed the results, and compiled a few teaching ideas. This article presents background information about *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, shares what our research revealed, and offers suggestions for classroom applications. Whatever your situation, this article may inspire you to drop everything and pick up the first in the series of books about Harry Potter, Muggle-raised but wizard-reared.

Background Information

Although she graduated from a British university and taught for awhile, J. K. Rowling, the creator of Harry Potter, lives in Edinburgh, Scotland, and as popular legend goes, was unemployed and struggling to raise a daughter singlehandedly when she conceived the idea for a series about a boy training to be a wizard.

Since the publication of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, Rowling has written three more books in the series and is continuing work on three more. Like *The Sorcerer's Stone*, the second (*Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*), third (*Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*), and fourth (*Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*) books chronicle a year of Harry Potter's schooling and continue the overarching theme of the conflict between good and evil. Why are readers worldwide hooked on this series? "Hooked" readers report that their attention was captured from the very first page.

The first book, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, opens with the story of Harry's survival and where he spent the first eleven years of his life, at his aunt and uncle's house. We learn of the miserable way Harry is treated in the home and that he knows nothing of his parents and their magical backgrounds. Around his eleventh birthday, a letter addressed to Harry arrives at the Dursley household. Snatching it out of his nephew's hands, Uncle Vernon discovers who the letter is from and does not allow Harry to read it. Vernon Dursley mistakenly believes that tearing up the letter (and the multitudes that follow) will prevent Harry from knowing

about his parents, their talents, and his own wizard potential. However, the powers of those at Hogwarts prevail as Hagrid, an ogre, finds Harry and the Dursleys hiding on a boat. The message that Harry is to report to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry as a first-year student is delivered, and Harry leaves with Hagrid to get supplies, much to the dismay of the Dursley family.

While out procuring all the school supplies with Hagrid, Harry is introduced to the world he will enter as he begins his schooling at Hogwarts. Once there, Harry is named (by the Sorting Hat, of course) a Gryffindor and soon becomes friends with Ron, a boy he met on the train to Hogwarts. As he begins his first day of classes, Harry discovers that his fellow students seem to know more about his past than he does. He finds himself overwhelmed by but liking his courses, until he attends Potions, taught by the infamous Professor Snape. Throughout the book, Harry feels that Snape does not like him and that he gives Harry a hard time particularly. This feeling is heightened during a game of Quidditch, a pastime at Hogwarts, when Harry feels the scar on his forehead burning and looks up to find Snape staring directly at him.

The mission that Harry and his friends, Ron and Hermione, find themselves involved in is learning the identity of one Nicolas Flamel. All that they can find is that Snape is somehow preoccupied with the Sorcerer's Stone, something they feel is connected with Flamel's identity. In the process of discovering the connection, Harry and company become heroes at Hogwarts, coinciding with the end of the school year and Gryffindor winning the treasured House Cup. The book concludes with Harry returning to the Dursleys for the summer, leaving the reader wondering what happens in the next Harry Potter book.

What We Discovered about Harry Potter's Readers

To understand and answer some of our questions about the Harry Potter phenomenon, we launched an informal, open-ended survey. Randomly approaching people we knew, we asked fifty different individuals if they'd read *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* and if they'd be willing to talk with us about the book. We jotted responses as we listened, first noting age, gender, and occupation. In

the process, we prompted readers to describe their reading habits and to talk about why they chose to read *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, how they liked it, to whom they would recommend the book, and ways they thought it might be used in a school's curriculum.

Readers consulted for the purposes of our less-than-scientific survey seemed happy to share their responses. We categorized the answers, and the results demonstrated several things. In terms of readers' habits and preferences, we were astonished to discover that only three of the people surveyed had not heard of Harry Potter—one was a twenty-two-year-old male and the other two were senior citizens. Based on our non-representative survey, it seems the young wizard has already become a cultural icon.

Over half of the people we surveyed claimed to have read *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, and several were currently reading one or the other sequels. Those respondents who reported having read the book ranged in age from seven to sixty-two. When those who had not yet read the book were asked if they would be willing to do so, only one participant, a twenty-eight-year-old male said no—he had “no interest in middle school literature.” Another who said she was not a reader because “it’s a frustrating process” had bought the book anyway “because of all the hype” and was planning to read it. Others reported being “curious to see what all the fuss is about.” Many of those who had not yet read the book said they definitely planned to do so. As one reader said, “I have it on my shelf” and will read it because “I’ve heard from various sources that it’s delightful.”

Although most of the people surveyed identified themselves as readers, their reading habits ran the gamut, from science fiction to newspapers to young adult literature. Reading preferences seemed to have no correlation with whether readers liked Harry Potter. For example, a forty-four-year-old male, a research scientist who claimed to be more comfortable reading journal articles and nonfiction, loved Harry Potter. He liked the way “the children used their good thinking coupled with unmitigated courage to triumph at the end of the day.” He considered *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* funny, entertaining, and well written. “I read it once to myself,” he explained, “and the second time I read it aloud to my children. Reading it aloud, I discovered diagonal humor, and I loved the word plays.”

Everyone who read the book liked it. They reported enthusiastically, using superlatives such as, “Thoroughly enjoyed it!” “I loved it!” “I liked it very much.” Readers talked about why the book had such a positive response. Citing realistic characters and a fast-paced plot, many readers gave Rowling high praise as a writer. Stylistically, one said, “The language was simple, yet felt intricately woven and delicate.” Most said the book was “hilarious and smart,” and they “enjoyed the magical elements.”

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Readers recommend the book “for kids third grade and older,” “to anyone with an inner child,” and to all who love “fantastic books.” The research scientist recommended the book to everyone, “Christians especially.” The survey respondents unanimously agree that Harry Potter books defy classification. Sixty percent of those interviewed recommended the book to “anyone” and “everyone.”

In terms of a school's curriculum and the place for Harry Potter within it, a second grade teacher (who had not yet read the book but planned to do so) said she was “hesitant to use it in school” because of “the issue of wizards and witches.” Another said she would “love to teach it, but would rather students pick it up themselves.” Most of the teachers surveyed talked about using the book in their classrooms, and several, for example a sixth grade teacher and an eighth grade teacher, reported that their students were reading Harry enthusiastically. According to our informants, Harry Potter should be placed on recommended lists for all students to read.

Possible Obstacles

Even after our surveys had been counted, cataloged, and reviewed, we continued to wonder about the audience of this wonderful fantasy novel. As we found in the surveys, this book appeals to a wide variety of individuals, ranging from young reluctants to adult nonfiction readers. And, as with any literary phenomenon, there is bound to be a group of typically literature-loving folks who are not enthralled with the current fad. However, although we failed to sample a broad enough audience to be certain, our anecdotal data and informal conversations reveal a possible trend. Minority readers seemed to have little interest in reading fantasy, much less *Harry Potter*, and couldn't get through the initial chapter.

Why are primarily white readers enjoying these books as opposed to readers of other races? We might say that, because Rowling herself is white, she was simply drawing from her own background and interests as she wrote *Harry Potter*. Unsatisfied with that conclusion, though, we began to poke around our bookshelves to see what is being written about fantasy novels. Dennis M. Kratz wrote in his essay, "Teaching Fantasy and Horror Fiction," that "fantasy expresses the dreams of culture" (629). Whose culture is being expressed in *Harry Potter*? More likely than not, through her uses of dialect and locale, Rowling is expressing the dreams of her own culture, Edinburgh, Scotland. Although this may appear problematic to teachers who wish to utilize this novel in the classroom, every seasoned teacher knows that not every child will enjoy every work read; however, if the teacher introduces books in a manner that gets students "hooked," then *Harry Potter*, or any other transcultural book, may easily become a classroom favorite (Pratt and Beaty, 1999).

Classroom Implications

What place does *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* have in a school's curriculum? The research scientist, not being a teacher, said, "It's hard to say how Harry might go to school, but it's such an attractive book, it will appeal to and capture nonreaders' interest, encourage thinking, and empower readers to trust their own thinking." Like the scientist, most of the readers surveyed for this article agreed that *Harry Potter* belongs in the classroom, although few had concrete suggestions for how to use the book.

Convinced that the book should be in the hands of classroom teachers (see the Muggles for

Harry Potter Web site at <http://www.mugglesforharrypotter.org>) but unsure of how it might be implemented, we discovered that the Scholastic Web page (<http://www.scholastic.com/harrypotter>) offers classroom ideas to supplement the book. We also put on our thinking caps (leaving the Sorting Hat aside for the moment) and came up with four suggestions for the English language arts classroom.

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1. Transforming Text: The Poetry of *Harry Potter*

Because the book presents only Harry's point of view, we thought it might be interesting to see students put into words the feelings of other characters, or explore thoughts that Harry might be having that are not implicitly stated. Not wanting students to be overwhelmed by the procedure, we suggest giving them the format, such as a poem. The process is simple. The teacher would previously select poetry (possibly William Stafford's "Fifteen," Nikki Giovanni's "Choices," or any other selection that would fit). The students would be given an opportunity to select the poem with which they would like to work. The teacher would then instruct the students that they must write from the point of view of one character in *Harry Potter*. The students could write a new, copy-changed version of the poem, using events and themes present in the novel. The following poem, Kim's own transformation of Harry, using Harry's point of view, is based on Stafford's "Fifteen" and serves as an example:

Eleven

In the cabinet that was my bedroom I was being
told something I was not supposed to know.
Letters arrived in multitudes, inviting me to
somewhere that my aunt and uncle were
afraid. I was eleven.

It was my eleventh birthday when the first letter arrived and the invitations increased as the week grew on. The fear in the eyes of Uncle Vernon and anxiety in those of Aunt Petunia created a desire to know more. I was eleven.

Hagrid found the Dursleys and I [sic] on a boat, delivered the letter that had been destroyed so many times in just a few short days. This ogre informed us I was off to a special school, following the footsteps of my late parents. I was eleven.

When I arrived at Hogwarts the other children knew more about my parents and myself than I did. Slightly intimidated, I promised myself that I would work hard and succeed. I was eleven. I finally realized I was special, eleven.

The copy-changed poem, a new poem that copies the format of another but changes the text, could be done individually or in small group settings. Again, teachers should use any poems they feel comfortable with for this type of activity. In her ninth grade classroom, Kim often used the idea of copy-changing poetry to connect reading with writing. For example, one of the more successful poems was Maya Angelou's "Still I Rise." In the spirit of Black History Month, Kim had her students research various historical or current figures of African American descent. With their findings, students were asked to follow the format of Angelou's poem and write from the point of view of their researched individual. The students seemed to enjoy this activity and asked to "publish" their work. This soon became an activity done often in class writings, individually and in groups.

2. Understanding Genre: The Fantasy of *Harry Potter*

A second implementation of *Harry Potter* in the classroom might be to explore and define fantasy novels. According to Beach and Marshall, a fantasy novel includes the following characteristics: an element of good versus evil, a quest, physical metamorphosis, "secondary" world, magic and supernatural elements, and illustrations (419–21). With the exception of the cover design, no other drawings appear in the text of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. However, Rowling's use of imagery and descriptive language serve as a substitute for illustrations in the definition presented above.

In order for students to truly get the feel of what a fantasy novel includes, we suggest that teach-

ers present the above definition and invite students to identify examples from the text. A way to do this might include splitting a class into six small groups and assigning each group one element of the definition of a fantasy novel to depict. For example, the group given the task of finding examples of good versus evil in the book would locate examples of this element. They would write down the incidents and cite the page numbers. Once every group has found at least three examples of their assigned characteristic, they would share their discoveries with the rest of the class.

Perhaps an even better way to promote full comprehension of the fantasy novel is to have the class create their own fantasy quest. Students would be asked to include three characters from *Harry Potter* and three they have invented. The characters the students extract from the text and those they create must include heroes, villains, and mentors. The students may be given the liberty of placing the story in the same setting as the novel or in one of their own selection. Once the setting has been established, the students should set goals for the quest they have been asked to create, as well as obstacles their characters may face along the way. Students may be placed in small groups or left to do this activity individually. When in small groups, the students may each draft an adventure—all of the same theme and a part of the same ultimate quest—and then take each student's piece to create a longer text.

In her ninth grade classroom, Kim tried an activity similar to this but substituted fairy tales for fantasies. As a class, students defined the components usually seen in fairy tales (such as animals personified, lessons to be learned, etc.) and cited examples found in "The Three Little Pigs." The students then split into groups, each having a "resident expert" for each component to be included. The group composed a fairy tale together. The students seemed to really enjoy this activity, and it served well as an introduction to a unit on short stories, as it called on prior schema and past reading experiences of the students.

3. Responding to Text: The Personal Connection to *Harry Potter*

Journals have become one of the greatest outlets for students in our classrooms in recent years. Sometimes, students are reluctant to state opinions in class discussions, and often class time allows limited opportunities for rich conversation. Writing is an

essential strategy for inviting and extending personal responses and has become extraordinarily popular among more reserved students. Students who believe that their opinions of the text are not the same as the majority of their peers may also see journal writing as a constructive medium to express their points of view. Journal writing gives students the opportunity to discover how events in *Harry Potter*'s life are like events in their own. Providing prompts that allow students to become the judges, predictors, and analysts of a work makes for in-depth and meaningful journal writing. After all, "fantasy provides our students the opportunity to encounter works that deal with basic questions of life. What is the nature of the human being? What constitutes evil? What are appropriate ways to combat it?" (Kratz 627). Given opportunities to do so, students will come up with answers, searching within themselves, to judge the characters in *Harry Potter* and their actions.

4. Analyzing Literary Elements: Close Textual Reading of *Harry Potter*

Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone is a book well suited for literary analysis. Students who have enjoyed reading the book for pleasure might also enjoy reading it again to locate specific examples of the author's skillful use of language. For example, Rowling creates rich descriptions of characters and uses English dialect throughout the text. Examples for textual analysis might include the following.

Characterization: Professor Snape

- What the character says: Snape interrogates and embarrasses Harry on the first day of Potions Class (Rowling 138).
- What the character does: Snape is believed to have looked into Harry's eyes during a Quidditch match and to have inflicted pain onto Harry through his scar (126).
- What others say of the character: Ron reports about Snape, "I've heard he can turn very nasty" (139), and Hagrid says, "Snape hardly likes any of his students" (141).

Legend: Harry Potter

- The story, according to Hagrid, of Harry's miraculous survival (55, 57).
- Harry Potter recognized as a legend for the first time (69).

Foreshadowing

- Hagrid mentions how good Charlie, Ron's older brother, is with animals (141).
- Hagrid will later need his help to get his illegal pet dragon off of school grounds.

Dialect: Hagrid's Use of English/Irish Vernacular

- "Blimey," substituting "ter" for "to," and replacing "yeh" for "you" (54)
- "Crikey" (64)
- "Bloke" (70)

Conclusion

Why include a discussion of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* in a special issue of *English Journal* dedicated to "the lure of young adult literature?" More than any other book published in recent memory, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* appeals to readers of all ages. While it may be considered a children's book, it certainly is not "childish," and although Harry is a young boy in the first book, he grows older with each new adventure. By the time Rowling writes book number seven, Harry will be seventeen years old. It is interesting to imagine how our conversations about the role of these books in the canon of young adult literature will mature as well.

Whether *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* is capable of sustaining a lasting place on the literary table remains to be seen and may be highly debated. For example, Anthony Holden, a British critic believing Harry Potter is no *Beowulf*, labels the popular new book "derivative, traditional, and not particularly well written" (Lyall A17). Conversely, in an eloquent justification of the book's literary merit, critic Richard Bernstein explains, "The key here is the hero, Harry himself." Harry Potter's story offers psychological depth "with its early images of alienation, rejection, loneliness and powerlessness leading to its classically fairy tale ending" (B2). It meets the rigorous criteria outlined by Bruno Bettelheim in *The Uses of Enchantment*.

How teachers and students determine the place for *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* in classrooms remains to be seen. Meanwhile, around the lunch tables and in the great halls of our schools, we await the next Harry Potter adventure.

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The Case for Contemporary Literature

"I suppose that one of the most important reasons why I think that contemporary literature should be included in our curriculum is that in comparatively few cases do our English courses affect the leisure reading of our pupils. There are some whose feelings are expressed by 'Next to my family, books have most influenced my ideals' and 'The characters in books take on real life when I read, and they seem to help me in solving my problems almost as much as the people I meet.' I wish, too, there were more who felt like the boy who knows that certain literature may not particularly help him in his future life, but 'it shows me that the world is not wholly made up of wars, political speeches and the like, but it shows that there is still something good to which one can turn to relax after a day's work, that there is something besides the headlines of bombings and killings.' "

M. Isabelle Hall. "Contemporary Literature from the Pupils' Point of View." *EJ* 30.5 (1941): 370-77.
